

## Tom Ruggirello - A Season of Thanksgiving

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As you all know, this coming Thursday is the day that our country has set aside to give thanks to God for its prosperity and blessings, and I love this holiday. Of all the holidays this nation celebrates, this is the best one. Well, you and I have been benefited from the freedoms and privileges that we've received since the birth of this country, and I thought it would be interesting just to talk a little bit about Thanksgiving.

Here is how one dictionary defines it. In North America. It is an annual national holiday marked by religious observances and a traditional meal including turkey. The holiday commemorates a harvest festival celebrated by the Puritans in 1621. I know that some of you were not born in this country and have not necessarily entered into the celebration of this here.

So I thought it would be helpful to you might enjoy a little history on how it all came about. You know, it was not an easy experience for the first settlers who journeyed to this country long before they came to the coast of the east coast of the United States. The east coast was settled by many different American North American tribes. The first area that was settled in the site of the first Thanksgiving is now part of southeastern Massachusetts and eastern Rhode Island. It was the home of the Wampanoag people.

And of course, being here for many centuries, who knows how long they were.

Let's see, they were well aware with the topography of the land. They knew how to hunt, they knew how to fish. They even knew how to harvest crops. The first settler story began in 1620 with the voyage of what is now the famous ship Mayflower. The Mayflower voyage was a 65 day ordeal in which 102 men, women and children crossed the stormy Atlantic.

And you can only imagine what that was like. There was no engines, no stability in these ships. They were strictly driven by the wind and the currents. The ship was actually the size of what we currently know as a city bus. So it was small for that many people.

Now, the people who comprised the Plymouth Colony were a group of English Protestants known as Puritans. They were Puritans because they wanted to break away from the Church of England and they were, because of that, called separatists, and they initially moved to Holland. I didn't know that. But after 12 years of very difficult financial problems there, they received funding from an English merchant to sail across the Atlantic to what was then called the New World.

After their arrival, it was tough. The group experienced a devastating New England winter for which they were ill prepared. By springtime, half of them had died from exposure and starvation. Fourteen of the 18 wives perished that winter, but the following year was better. In 1621, they had a bountiful harvest, and they thought that it would be good to celebrate that harvest with a day of thanksgiving.

I think it was their Christian faith that helped them look at the good that was in the new land and not mourn over what had passed. Now, one day that fall, in preparation for that, their first Thanksgiving, they were out hunting, and the Wampano natives heard the gunshots, and they thought that they were possibly coming to kill them war. So I thought their chief was very wise, a man by the name of Massasoit. He visited the settlement to see what was really happening, and he found out that they were just really hunting.

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And so he sent his men to help them hunt for deer and other things for the feast, and then for three days, the English and the native men, women and children ate together. They ate deer, corn, shellfish and roasted deer, but probably not turkey, and it even says that they played games and sang and danced together, and I thought, that's a vision of thanksgiving that I want to hold with me.

You know, we've all heard bad stories about how natives and settlers didn't get along, but this was a good reception, and although, unfortunately, it would not last, it would last for only one generation. Now, the first recorded religious Thanksgiving, that first one was a thanksgiving for the harvest. But the first recorded religious thanksgiving in Plymouth happened two years later, in 1623. Then the colonists gave special thanks because they had just survived a two month drought and they were fearful that they would lose everything again.

But because of the abundant rain that finally came, they were thankful to the Lord, and then in 1789, George Washington issued a proclamation designating November 6th of that year as a national day of thanksgiving for their newly created nation and for the federal constitution. It was a one day thing. His proclamation is somewhat long, but I just wanted to read a few excerpts just to get a feel for what leadership back then had in their hearts. This is part of what he wrote.

He says, now therefore do I recommend and Assign Thursday, the 26th day of November next, to be devoted by the people of these states to the service of that great and glorious being who is the beneficent, beneficent author of all that was good, that is, or that will be, that we may then all unite in rendering unto him our sincere and humble thanks for his kind care and protection of the people of this country previous to their becoming a nation, for the signal and manifold mercies and the favorable interpositions of his Providence which we experience in the course and conclusion of the late war for the great degree of tranquility, union and plenty which we have since enjoyed, and also that we may then unite in most humbly offering our prayers and supplications to the great Lord and ruler of nations, and beseech him to pardon our national. Pardon our national and other transgression. Transgressions. There was more.

I thought this kind of captured the heart of what he was saying. I think these are impressive words. You don't hear eloquent words like that very much anymore. They were impressive because they came from a man who had experienced the ravages of war and then helped to establish a new nation based on good godly principles. One thing that caught my attention and those of you who attend the Tuesday Exodus study, we're going to get to this shortly.

He referred to God as the beneficent author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be. That comes right from Exodus 3:14, where Moses asked God, what should I tell the Israelites your name? And God says to him, tell them that I will be what I will be or I will become what I will become. That's the name. The meaning of the name Yahweh or Jehovah.

He is a creator, as Washington said, of all that was good, all that is good, and all that will be good. So he really is defining the name of Jehovah for us, and it shows that our early fathers read the Scriptures. Now, like most people who have lived through war, Washington wanted peace and he wanted prosperity for the people here, and he felt that it would be proper for the nation to be united in giving thanks.

And I'll tell you, it's interesting that almost 100 years later, Abraham Lincoln had the exact same feeling and thoughts, and he realized the hand of Providence. Like Washington, Lincoln recognized the country's national sins and sought God's forgiveness. That's impressive for a leader of a nation to recognize before God that our nation has sinned and we ask your forgiveness for those things.

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He felt that the savory was a great national sin. Well, during the Civil War, Lincoln felt it would help heal the nation and finally declared Thanksgiving as a national holiday to be celebrated every year.

This is part of what he said.

The year that is drawing towards its close has been filled with the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies. To these bounties, which are so constantly enjoyed that we are prone to forget the source from which they come, others have been added which are of so extraordinary a nature that they cannot fail to penetrate and soften the heart which is habitually insensible to the ever watchful providence of almighty God. In the midst of a civil war of unequal magnitude and severity, peace has been preserved with all nations, order has been maintained, the laws have been respected and obeyed, and harmony has prevailed everywhere except in the theater of military conflict. No human counsel hath devised, nor hath any mortal hand worked out these great things. They are the gracious gifts of the most high God, who, while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy.

I love that it has seemed to me fit and proper that they should be solemnly, reverently, reverently and gratefully acknowledged as with one heart and one voice by the whole American people, and I recommend to them that while offering up the ascriptions justly due to him for such singular deliverances and blessings, they also do, with humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience, recommend to his tender care all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners, or sufferers in the lamentable civil strife in which we are unavoidably engaged and fervently implore the interposition of the almighty hand to heal the wounds of the nation and to restore it as soon as may be consistent with the divine purposes, to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquility, and union. Well, there was more, brethren, but I think you get the point. See sufficient of what Lincoln's feelings were. These are elegant words, and you can kind of see brother Russell's style of writing in those long sentences that contain many thoughts, but they build on the sequence of order and come to a conclusion.

We know that Abraham Lincoln hated war, but he hated slavery even more, and he knew that if he allowed the nation to be divided, if he allowed the south to go the way it was going, the slaves might never be free, and because of the importance of bringing the south under the just laws of freedom, he was willing to continue the war seeking God's help, despite the fact that he knew how terrible the war was. The last part of what he said I thought was especially insightful. He asked God to restore the nation as soon as may be consistent with the divine purposes.

You know, both Lincoln and Washington's thanksgiving proclamations were in the context of war. Of course, Washington was the Revolutionary War, and, and under Lincoln, it was a civil war. So war often motivates people to seek divine intervention. That's what we see in the heart of both of these godly men.

I think their Sentiments express what God is looking for by allowing sin and evil into his creation. Both declarations exhibit a spirit humbled by the conflicts they have seen. Both express the need for divine mercy that a nation can only endure with the blessings of God. Brethren, that's an important principle they recognized and that we see demonstrated in God's plan. Only by experiencing war, famine, inhumanity and death will mankind learn the same lesson that civilization can never be fully blessed without the rulership and guidance of God.

Imagine a world that comes to appreciate that and wants to be united together as a world thanking God for His abundance. God has allowed mankind to suffer in order for them to see the reality that

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peace and prosperity comes only from him. When Lincoln asked the nation to be restored according to the divine purposes, brethren, little did he know that in the next few years the harvest message would be introduced to this country and this country would become the staging ground for truth doctrines to spread throughout the world. The very freedoms he fought for would be enhanced with the true gospel message. All men everywhere are equal before God and all share the privilege of his divine blessings.

The truth is a message that addresses not only America's restoration from civil war for the message that proclaims the end of all war and will usher in lasting world peace. Lincoln or Washington could never have hoped for that. They could have never thought that they could accomplish that, that a nation could ever do that or see the dead come back to life in a world united under the government of Christ. That's what we pray for. We pray for something very similar, but we pray for it under Christ.

Brethren, you and I know there is more to be thankful for than what these thanksgiving proclamations could hope for. America thanks God for good harvests and for prosperity. We thank him for the hope of eternal life.

Lincoln also made an excellent observation in his opening comment when he said to these bounties which are so constantly enjoyed that we are prone to forget the source from which they come. I think he's right. That's human nature, isn't it? And we all probably do that from time to time, and so that's one reason this season is good.

It's good for us to remember and look back in our own lives and to refresh our own minds and see the reason each of us individually has to be thankful to God, and as a reminder, I've asked Sister Cheryl to Read from Psalms 134.

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits. Who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good, so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's. The Lord works righteousness and justice for all who are oppressed. The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger forever.

He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love towards those who fear him. As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us. As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him. For he knows our frame.

He remembers that we are dust. Yes, I see that David is even more eloquent than Lincoln or Washington could have been because of what he knows in this passage of Psalm is reminding himself not to forget all the benefits he receives from God, and I think we can certainly share in that sentiment because we do tend to forget. He mentions forgiveness, spiritual healing, redeeming our lives from the pit. He describes how God crowns us with unshakable love and mercy and how God renews our strength.

That very poetic part that we often quote is that God removes our transgressions as far as the east is from the west, and he shows compassion to his children, knowing that we are dust. Aren't you thankful that that's the God we worship and that is dealing with us? Who understands us, who knows us, who wants to elevate us, wants to bless us and give us life. That's the God we love and

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serve, and with thankful hearts we praise his holy name.

Brethren, I find it very important to remind myself regularly of these wonderful benefits that he provides. I'd like to share something that Cheryl came across as we were driving up to Milwaukee a couple of weeks ago. Very different approach here, but it's really driving the same point home of what we have to be thankful for. Someone had posted a question on Facebook that seemed to stir an amazing response from people. The question was, if someone gave you a box that contained everything you have lost in your life, what's the first thing you'd search for?

Think about that. Some of the answers were cute, some were more serious. Here are a few of the lighter ones. Someone said I would search for my youth. Someone else would search for their marbles.

Third person would search for my teeth, my keys, and my time. Then another person said I would search for everything I put in a safe spot, and I thought, well, if they really put it in a safe spot, they wouldn't be searching for it.

And then some were a little more serious. Someone said I would look for family pictures or my grandmother's Bible, or a happy childhood or my heart before it was broken.

And then it gets very serious. Someone said they would look for years lost in alcohol addiction. Another person said I would look for my voice box lost to cancer, and then one person said I would look for the baby I lost, and then a very sad one.

I've lost pretty much everything that ever meant anything to me, so I don't care. There's a sense of hopelessness there, isn't it? And then a lady said I would search for my firstborn son my dad made me give away 36 years ago. Someone else said I would search for Jesus. If I knew then what I know now, I would have been a different person and would have accomplished a lot of different stuff and had a completely different journey.

And lastly, someone said I would search for my hope for humanity, but that will always be lost. Oh my goodness. Almost makes you cry, doesn't it? The sadness that people have experienced in their life and realize they're probably never going to get the good things that they had. But they reflect the regrets that many people are forced to live with.

What can the person who lost all hope be thankful for? How can the woman who gave away her baby ever really have a joyful family thanksgiving?

Now, there were actually hundreds of answers, but the majority said that they would look for deceased family members. Moms. That was a really big one. A lot of people would search for their moms. Then there were dads, children, grandparents and siblings.

Very few said that they would search for lost money or lost wealth. But brethren, we know that most of these serious things will be found again. Not in the make believe box, but in reality. The person who wanted to find Jesus to be a different person will get the opportunity, won't they? In the kingdom, the individual who can't speak due to cancer will sing the praises of him who can restore the human body and make it perfect again.

The one who lost all hope will see it restored better than anything they could hope for when they were young. Of course these are sad expressions, but they illustrate a major reason God designed His plan. He is teaching that selfish ambition cannot bring happiness. That family and loved ones

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are more precious, and the only thing that can fill the heart is Love.

So, brethren, as you and I approach thanksgiving, we should call to mind the tremendous reasons for being grateful to our loving Heavenly Father. Not only for our lives now, not only for the providences, not only for being part of the vine and part of the branches, but for what he has ahead for us and for humanity. I like that thought in the study about the temple. The temple is not the end. Building the spiritual temple is for the blessing of the world.

So there's a work to do that he's preparing us for. What does it mean for us that we can look into the box of God's promises and know what the future holds? We know what will be restored. We know what will be fixed and what blessings wait for us and the human family. So knowing the answers to those things gives us the courage to truly be thankful for everything in our lives.

Oh, give thanks unto the Lord for He is good for his mercy endureth forever. Rather, we're going to close this service with a hymn titled We Thank Thee, Lord. It's a video with people singing. They're going to play an introductory verse first and then some instrumental between the verses. But when they start singing, please join in with them.

I think you'll recognize the melody right away.

We set aside one day out of the year to be thankful and yet the Lord blesses us all year and we should be thankful all year for all the friends we hold so dear for peace on earth both far and near we thank thee, Lord for life and health those common things which every day and hour brings for home where our affection clings we thirst the Lord for love of Thine which never tires which all our beautiful better thought inspires and warms our lives with heavenly fires we thank the Lord for all the blessings of the year we thank thee, Lord.